



"DR." JAMES STILL — NEW JERSEY PIONEER

A number of years ago, Mrs. Dorothy Porter, curator of the Moorland Collection of literature by and on the Negro in the Founders Library of Howard University, brought to the writer's attention an interesting book entitled, "Early Recollections and Life of Dr. James Still." The work is an autobiography printed for the author by J. B. Lippincott & Co. in 1877. The book is a remarkable document in so many ways that the editor decided Dr. Still would be an excellent subject for a historical sketch in the *Journal*, after sufficient research had been done to supplement the information in the book. Additional material has proved so difficult to obtain, however, that it has seemed best to publish a short account based on what is available in the hope that this might come to the attention of some who had additional knowledge of Dr. Still and might be so kind as to send to the *Journal* what they know so that the record might be amplified through our pages.

Still is of historical interest because he was one of several early Negroes who, without any formal training, established reputations as medical doctors and apparently were permitted to practice by the customs of the times without legal interference. He was born April 9, 1812, in a place called Indian Mill in Burlington County, New Jersey. His parents, Levin and Charity Still, were Maryland slaves. The father bought his freedom and secured that of his wife by bringing her to New Jersey. The family established itself in the region of Lumberton, a "Down Jersey" town where "Dr." Still spent his entire career of practice. He is still remembered in the area, where he was known as the Black Doctor and the Doctor of the Pines. Dr. Still had two well known brothers who each also wrote a book. The more famous was William Still, author of "The Underground Railroad," an ardent abolitionist and worker with the Underground. The other was Peter Still who wrote, "The Kidnapped and the Ransomed." It is believed that Dr. Still may have descendants now living in the Lumberton region.

In a 1947 story in the Newark Star-Ledger, Henry C. Beck wrote that Dr. Still's "ideas of medicine, through unorthodox, were accepted by hundreds of patients who later professed themselves cured."

Still's formal education consisted of three months instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic. His book, published when he was 65, reflects pardonable pride in his accomplishments. He developed a large office practice and on long circuit rides with horse and buggy covered

a large territory, visiting "deep in the woods" patients who had no one else to succor them. He attained sufficient financial prosperity to acquire first the land on which he built his house, later the adjoining land on which was a tavern into which he moved his office, finally extending his holdings until they stretched a half mile along the road which ran in front of his house.

Different allusions throughout his book reveal Still's philosophy to have been one of confidence in honest and tireless effort. He decries frequently against racial prejudice but shows no bitterness and expresses appreciation of white friends who helped him. Numerous statements indicate a deep religious faith. His style is one of grave simplicity, but there are occasional flashes of humor. He published three poems, two of which appear on pages 132 and 153, respectively, in this issue of the *Journal*. A few paragraphs from the introductory chapter will impart the flavor of the man.

It so happened that I received three months' instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, which completed me to start out in life. If so be I should prefer a professional life of any kind, as doctor, lawyer, or minister, or whatever pursuit I chose to follow, I stood robed with three months' education with which to start. For this much I feel truly thankful, when I look around and see so many deprived of even this.

I know the critic will find fault, and also laugh; but I ask him to put himself in my forlorn condition, and perhaps his sympathy would be excited for those less favored than himself. Let the case be as it may, I feel contented to let it pass before the public for what it is worth. Perhaps I might have done better, but my time has been very limited while engaged in the work. I have written mostly at night, being busy through the day attending to office duties.

Being frequently called upon a dozen or twenty times a day, I could not collect my thoughts for any length of time. Indeed, my whole life has been such that I did everything in a hurry. I hope my advantages will not be viewed collaterally with the learned and great men who have had access to seminaries, where the mantle of some functionary or dignitary has fallen upon them. Bright advantages have never been my portion. It cannot be said of me that I sat at the feet of the learned or drank from the fountains from whence all knowledge flows.

I hope this book may be a stimulus to some poor, dejected fellow-man, who, almost hopelessly, sits down and folds his arms and says, "I know nothing, and can do nothing." Let me say to you. Study nature and its laws, the source from which these mighty truths are drawn. Great minds are not made in schools. I am speaking to me whose pecuniary circumstances are such as to prevent them from being partakers of these blissful privileges.

A great mind is planted within us in the beginning of our lives, and, like other plants, it needs cultivation and watering from the best fountains. If these are out of reach, cultivate

and water as best you can and trust to the great Ruler of the universe for a crop, and you will not be disappointed in reaping a bountiful harvest. though you are often caused to feel depressed for want of a proper mode of utterance when in the company of the learned. Nevertheless, they will understand you if you cannot understand them.

Still states that at the age of three and a half years he witnessed a physician vaccinate the children of his household and, "From that moment I was inspired with a desire to be a doctor. It took deep root in me, so deep that all the drought of poverty or lack of education could not destroy the desire. From that day I did not want any knowledge save that of the healing art. It grew with my growth and strengthened with my strength. My thinking faculties were aroused, and I soon commenced to practise. Among the children I procured a piece of glass, and made virus of spittle; I also procured a thin piece of pine bark, which I substituted for a lancet. Thus was the little acorn, which was intended to become an oak, thrown into the thicket, not knowing that it should ever again be seen or heard from, but there was One, unseen, who cared for and watered and protected it."

Still grew to manhood, worked in a glue factory in Philadelphia and after a time returned to his country area in New Jersey. He married and his wife died shortly after the birth of a daughter. This little one died a year later, three days after a second marriage on August 8, 1839. In 1842 Still's father died and in the following year, 1843, at 31 he took the first step leading to his career as a self-taught physician.

I took my horse home, and concluded to go at something better than work by the day. So I bought a still of Wm. Jones, near Mount Holly, and got him to instruct me in the business. I took it home, and set it myself, and began to distil sassafras roots, and, in the summer time, herbs of various kinds. I went to town every two weeks with oil, and felt much pleased with my prospects. While I digged the roots my wife tended the fire for me, so that all went on well. This was in the year eighteen hundred and forty-three. The practice of medicine, on which I had set my heart earlier, would occasionally come into my mind, but I thought the day was past and my fate sealed. I continued with my business that season alone. I also learned to make the essence of peppermint and many other kinds of essences. I then thought I was getting on finely. I dealt with Charles and William Ellis, druggist in Philadelphia. In often being there and seeing medicine, my old anxiety for the knowledge revived, but how to bring about the matter I did not know.

Later, on a trip to Philadelphia, Still bought a medical botany for one dollar and two weeks later returned and bought a second book, a formulary for a dollar and a quarter.

After reaching home and reading botany for two weeks I grew more anxious, and at the end of two weeks I found myself again at Dr. Cook's office: took his dollar and a quarter work, which contained formulas for preparing medicine, and some directions for its administration. One of the great mysteries that so long perplexed me was now laid open. The second book I had obtained was one of only one hundred and sixty-four pages, giving instructions for making pills, powders, tinctures, salves, and linaments. I then thought I would need to study anatomy, which would require some time. Besides, I had no books, and no one to instruct me. So I thought that I would use the books in my possession to the best benefit, and possibly in the course of a few years the way would open for further study, for I thought that I knew nothing about diseases. I had never been among the sick, and did not intend to do anything for anybody.

Still describes his being drawn into practice as accidental. "I did not know that the time had come for me to practise. I made up some tinctures for my own family, and one of the neighbors was known to it. One of the daughters of this neighbor developed scrofula, and he had me visit her. I gave her medicine which soon cured her. I thought it no great thing, for it always seemed to me that all diseases were curable, and I wondered why the doctors did not cure them."

This experience was followed by another accidental occurrence. Still wished to dig sassafras roots for his distilling business, on another man's property. The owner consented provided Still would cure him of the "piles." Still prepared a remedy which worked and his medical career was launched. Presently, he says, "My practise increased, and I had little time at the distillery; so I resolved to give it up, and to attend to the practice which seemed growing upon me." Thenceforward he was a full-time practitioner.

Inevitably the charge of practicing medicine without a license was brought. Consultation with an attorney brought the information that, "You can sell medicine and charge for delivering, and then you can collect it just the same as for anything else." Apparently Dr. Still and the authorities chose to view his activities in this perspective as he was not further disturbed.

Naturally he was not approved by the medical profession. Several cures are reported by a mildly gloating Still in patients with whom regular physicians had failed.

His wife and her brother came for me one Sunday, and stated the case, and wished me to go and see her husband.

I refused on the grounds that other physicians were attending him, and that I would not intrude. They went home, and I heard nothing more about him until the next Sunday, when the brother came, saying that his brother was still ill, and never could be any better under his present treatment. I objected for a while, but he strongly insisted. I consented and went. Found him very sick, prostrated from long illness. I examined him, and administered medicine which proved of the utmost benefit. He soon recovered his natural health, to the great delight of his family and friends, although it was quite humiliating to the pride of the profession.

Dr. Still devotes one chapter of his book to the rationale of his interpretation and treatment of fevers. It tells its own story.

As it has been so frequently said by physicians that I know nothing of fevers, I feel it incumbent upon me to give a brief sketch of my treatment. It has been always my impression that the doctor was sent for to prevent protraction in disease, and by proper remedies to alleviate the suffering patient. Such being the case, my duty seemed plain. When called to attend a fever patient, I at once set myself to work to find out the nature of the case. I would carefully examine the patient externally and internally. I would pass my hand over the surface of the body to ascertain, if possible, its condition, and in most cases I found the skin dry and hot, not so much even as finding moisture in the axilla, showing excretions were prohibited from passing through the ordinary channels. Nature makes a charge from within, perspiration attempts to pass, but every avenue is closed. It recedes to the internal organs, and there makes war upon the vitals. The heart is compelled by the invader to resist powerfully; thus it beats one hundred and ten or more. The pulse is an indication of what is going on. The patient is thirsty and racked with pain. The head seems ready to burst, the eyes glare, the tongue is coated, the breath offensive, the urine scanty, and every function deranged. Appetite gone, sleep disturbed and unrefreshed, watchers begin to prognosticate for good or bad.

Now for treatment. I first ordered my patient to be bathed all over with soda-water or weak lye, the whole surface to be rubbed well with it. Next sudorific medicine, followed with warm catnip tea, to be repeated two or three times a day. If the head be hot, take whisky, vinegar, and soft water, (one teacup of each), and one teaspoonful fine salt; mix, and apply cold several times a day. Soak the feet at night in ashes and warm water. Give a dose of vegetable physic every day, or every other day, according to circumstances. Keep up a determination to surface. Give a portion of diaphoretic powders at night, followed with warm catnip tea, to promote sleep. Wash the face, chest, and arms with vinegar and water every day. Give cold water, if craved, or plenty of lemonade, made in the usual way. If vomiting take place, take one teaspoonful of saleratus, put in half-pint of peppermint tea, and sweeten with white sugar, and give a tablespoonful to an adult every fifteen or thirty minutes, till the vomiting stops. Add ten drops of laudanum to each dose, and for low excitement or prostration take carbonate of ammonia (hartshorn) three scruples, gum-arabic and loaf sugar each two drachms, mint tea half-pint, mix, and give one tablespoonful or two every hour, according to circumstances. If the tongue is much coated, or the symptoms do not change for the better, give an emetic, composed of vegetable, followed by warm boneset tea, to be drank freely to assist vomiting; this will cleanse the stomach and excite perspiration.

If this treatment be strictly followed, you shall not need to wait nine days for the fever to run its course. Beside, you shall find that the name of the fever is not such a monstrous matter as that you read of in books of allopathy, and as you have been led to believe.

I will give now some recipes which I think are very valuable in treating fevers and many other maladies:

SUDORIFIC DROPS

Take Opium	2 oz.
Ipecac	2 oz.
Saffron	2 oz.
Camphor	2 oz.
Virginia snakeroot	2 oz.
Pleurisy root	2 oz.

All bruised; diluted alcohol, 3 quarts.

Place these in a bottle and macerate for two weeks, then express, and filter through paper; or if you have a percolator you can put the bruised articles in it and pour on alcohol to cover them, and let them stand for twenty-four hours, then gradually pour on the rest of the alcohol, until it all runs through in a bottle to receive it.

Dose.—One teaspoonful in a teacupful of warm catnip tea every hour or two till it produces perspiration.

This I have found to be one of the best remedies in fulfilling the intention for which it is given; which is, generally, to produce free perspiration. One dose or two, aided by warm catnip tea, and bathing the feet in warm water and ashes, will cause copious perspiration. Hence it is useful in many diseases, as fevers, pleurisy, inflammation, colds, and coughs.

EMETIC POWDER

Take Ipecac	4 oz.
Lobelia	4 oz.
Bloodroot	2 oz.

Pulverize separately, mix, and rub well in a mortar.

Dose.—Teaspoonful given every thirty minutes in warm boneset tea. Useful in all cases where an emetic is required. It is not often the second dose is required to produce the effect desired. Thus you cleanse the stomach, dislodge morbid matter, excite the viscera, vivify the nerves, open the pores, and drive the invading disease from the vital parts and places, and leave the enemy at the mercy of the practitioner.

ANTIBILOUS POWDERS, OR COMMON PHYSIC

Take Jalap root, pulverized	4 oz.
Alexandria senna, pulverized	8 oz.
Cream of tartar	½ oz.
Cloves, pulverized	3 drs.

Mix, and rub well in a mortar.

Dose.—One teaspoonful in warm water, sweetened, on an empty stomach.

This I think is one of the best medicines used as physic. It cleanses well the stomach and bowels, and is not drastic in its operation; is perfectly safe to persons of all ages, from the infant of one week old to the old man of one hundred years. It removes viscid accumulations in a surprising manner, and restores the enervated powers of nature.

COUGH BALSAM

Take Spikenard root	8 oz.
Comfrey root	8 oz.
Horehound tops	8 oz.
Elecampane root	8 oz.
Bloodroot	8 oz.
Skunk-cabbage root	8 oz.
Pleurisy root	8 oz.

All bruised; then boil in two gallons of soft water down to one gallon; express and strain the liquid, and see that you have one gallon. Then add ten pounds of white sugar, and boil to form a syrup. When done, strain again into something to cool, and when nearly cool take two drachms oil anise and four ounces alcohol, mix and pour into the balsam; also one pint tincture of lobelia. Let the whole stand twenty-four hours to settle, then bottle up in half-pint bottles.

Dose.—One teaspoonful three, four, or five times a day.

This balsam far excels anything that I have ever known used for pulmonary affections and coughs of long standing. It is admirably calculated to relieve that constricted state of the lungs which is so often met with in consumption. It assists expectoration and invigorates the whole system, and is seldom or never given without benefit. This is an excellent remedy for asthma or any bronchial affection attended with difficulty of respiration.

It will be observed that the doses mentioned in these recipes are for adults, and may be proportioned to children according to their age. In giving my early recollections, I did not propose, in the first place, to add to the account any of my recipes, or to give the history of my treatment of fevers or any other diseases; but, being a firm believer in the gift of Providence, I could not well omit it, knowing his all mankind owe their being to that Creator who bestows his blessings upon all.

He it is who supplies the head with brains, the heart with thought according to that we are capacitated to receive, and much depends on ourselves whether we advance in knowledge or recede into idiocy. For myself, I very much regret that I did not enjoy the advantages of an early education. I had but six months of schooling, and that under very imperfect teachers. I beg, therefore, the pardon of my readers for errors in this work.

As to his ethics, Still says,

I never offered any inducements, either verbal or written, for persons to try my remedies. I was willing to let merit alone be the test, and parties left free to choose or to refuse as best suited them. I always had a special abhorrence to those who vaunted themselves and medicines as superior to any other. It was to me like a net cast into the sea for fish, the small and weak getting caught and the large making good an escape. The millions of money expended in vaunted remedies by the sick, in hopes of being relieved of their ills, cannot be estimated. The venders of quack nostrums eat the oysters and the afflicted the shells.

Many of Still's patients were white. He claimed to have cured cases diagnosed by competent physicians as cancers. He emphasized that he gave the conditions no name. They were called cancer by others.

I might fill volumes of just such cases as above stated, where I have cured patients who have been pronounced incurable in cancers, tumors, white-swelling, and almost every kind of disease, which fact has led me believe that all

diseases are curable in certain states or conditions of them, and I cannot believe otherwise. Thirty years of practice have confirmed me in this belief. I have attended doctors, lawyers, clergymen, and all other classes of mankind, and have been much gratified to see them restored to health. I can say assuredly that I have found no disease but that I have also found a remedy for it in some stage of it. Strange as this language may seem, it is nevertheless true.

Several disquisitions on fevers, rheumatism and cancer in the latter portion of the book have a Hippocratic tone. One wonders how one with so little schooling could have learned to write so well.

The closing chapters of the book are moralistic and philosophical. He exhorts his colored friends that,

You should conduct yourselves on true moral principles, not gaudy in manners nor boisterous in talk, your ways calm and decisive, your word so sacred that 'tis never violated, your promises fulfilled, your debts paid, modest in all things and meddlesome in none, you shall find the monster Prejudice only a thing to be talked about. Merit alone will promote you to respect. You will also see the prejudice between the whites of the higher and lower classes. It is not expected that the rich and refined should mingle with the poor and low. It is no matter what color they are, my experience for the last thirty years is that man is man according to merit. Where truth and prosperity are in the ascending, prejudice is in the descending scale. Many a colored man supposes, and so does many a white one, that when he is making money his neighbors will estimate him by the show he makes. He does not seem to understand that humility should dwell with frailty, and tone for ignorance, error, and imperfection. In all my practice I have ever found that prejudice would skulk when confronted by common sense. I cannot see but that I have had a full share of practice. I have been treated with all due respect. Every color and class has its preferences, for reasons inherent in one's being; to account for certain predilections would be simply impossible.

Dr. Still thought every person should read Christ's Sermon on the Mount for instruction. He was for school integration.

I have been opposed to colored schools wholly because they were against the principles of Christian fellowship. I think that co-education would be beneficial to each race. First, it would establish Christian unity. It would elevate the colored race by a sort of refinement in their expression. It would make them believe that they were a part and parcel of mankind. It would arouse in them the desire to be cleanly and as refined as their class-mates. It would stimulate them to love education, and to appreciate it. It would dispel that horrible idea that they were esteemed nothing above the beast. It would make them feel justice to be a reality and not a sham.

Separate schools are debasing to the manners of each, whilst it causes the one to imbibe imbecility and the other superiority, thus fixing a great gulf between them, which shall be impassable. It plants the seed of hate in their youthful hearts, and there it is watered from the streams of strife until it becomes so deeply rooted that it grows to a large tree, whose branches spread over the whole land and become the habitation of every unclean and hateful bird, and its fruit is poisonous to the nation. Separation causes in the colored child hate, and unbecoming behavior, and habitual idleness with indelible slovenliness; for all of which, I fear, a Christian republic will have to render an account.

By any standard James Still was a noteworthy figure of high ideals and aspirations. Though his medical background was deficient, it appears that he knew how to live within his limitations. He apparently helped many and harmed few. Certainly he had a large following who believed in him, so that his image survives to this day.

The date, place and circumstances of his death we do not know at this writing.

W. MONTAGUE COBB, M.D.

PLAN TO ATTEND

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51st Annual Meeting

JOHN A. ANDREW CLINICAL SOCIETY

Tuskegee Institute, Ala. — April 21-26, 1963

7TH IMHOTEP NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF HOSPITAL INTEGRATION

Union Baptist Church

Atlanta, Ga. — May 17-18, 1963

68th Annual Convention

NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Los Angeles, Calif., August 12-15, 1963